

2nd tries for budget

Uniondale, North Bellmore schools weigh next steps

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
john.hildebrand@newsday.com

Two Long Island school districts that failed to pass 2018-19 budgets under unusual circumstances have called for Tuesday board meetings to map their next moves — a high-stakes process that can result in tax freezes when spending plans don't win approval on a second try.

Uniondale's school board scheduled a 3 p.m. session in the little theater of the district's high school on Goodrich Street. North Bellmore's board is slated to meet at 7:30 p.m. in the all-purpose room of Martin Avenue Elementary School in Bellmore.

The remaining 122 districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties gained voter approval of their spending plans in balloting last week. The overall 98.4 percent passage rate was among the highest on record for the Island.

North Bellmore school officials already said they will hold a revote on June 19 — the statewide date assigned for second attempts — and that the district's proposed budget may be revised downward slightly from the original \$57.2 million plan.

In the Uniondale system, the superintendent said the district's next step has not been decided, with some details to be hammered out in executive session — that is, behind closed doors — before a public session.

"It's extremely important to get public support, no doubt about it," said William Lloyd, superintendent of Uniondale schools, during a brief telephone interview. "We don't know yet



The Uniondale school board is planning closed-door session Tuesday after the initial budget was rejected.

what we're going to do about the budget, so we'll be going into executive session first to discuss some pros and cons, and then we'll come out and talk."

Uniondale's move toward a closed-door session drew a sharp response from Robert Freeman, a state expert on legal requirements for open meetings.

Freeman, in response to a Newsday query, said state law clearly requires most discussions by policymaking groups, including school boards, to be carried out in public.

"Clearly, the public has a public interest in knowing how and why a school district budget is developed," added Freeman, executive director of the New York State Committee on Open Government, based in Albany.

The state's tax-cap law, which took effect during the 2012-13 school year, allows several options in cases where districts fail to pass budgets in the first round of balloting.

Under one approach, a district's school board can adopt a "contingency" budget that freezes taxation at the current year's level and holds spending within that limit. As an alternative, a district can resubmit the same budget, or a revised version, to voters in June.

During this second round, a budget that stays within the district's tax cap, as set by state formula, can be approved by a simple majority vote. A budget that seeks to override the cap requires a 60 percent majority, and rejection in the second round of voting results in an automatic tax freeze.

That kind of financial restriction can force a school district to dig into reserve funds, cut staff or reduce student services.

Last week's voter defeat of Uniondale's \$197.3 million budget was somewhat out of the ordinary in that the district had not proposed a tax override. To the contrary, the system's tax

collections under its proposed 2018-19 budget would have risen less than 1 percent, which was well under the allowed cap of 3.82 percent.

However, the plan did call for a spending hike of 5.41 percent — among the highest in Nassau County. Some local residents complained that the number seemed high, especially since the Uniondale district had just managed to push through a \$158 million bond issue two months earlier for additional classrooms to accommodate surging enrollment, as well as technology improvements. The district has about 7,200 students.

In the end, the district's budget went down by a vote of 847 in favor and 1,009 opposed. In addition, the board's president and vice president, Emerson Mott and James Sharpe III, both veteran trustees with more than 20 years' service between them, were defeated by

challengers Justin Brown and Charmise Desiré.

North Bellmore's setback was even more unusual.

That district's board, like Uniondale's, had not tried to bust its tax cap. Moreover, its proposed budget actually obtained majority support in the initial round on May 15, with a vote of 1,322 in favor to 1,231 opposed.

North Bellmore faces a revote nonetheless, triggered by a provision of the tax-cap law.

Last week's ballot there included two spending proposals — separate from the budget and backed by two rival parent groups — which would have increased the number of students bused at district expense to public and nonpublic schools. Costs of the extra busing would have pushed the district over its cap, and that meant the proposed budget required a 60 percent majority.

No such busing propositions will appear on North Bellmore's ballot on June 19, and a simple majority will suffice to approve the budget itself.

In an interview with Newsday, the district's superintendent, Marie Testa, reiterated a point she had attempted to make with residents throughout the budgeting season — that the district's spending blueprint is reasonable, especially considering that it covers costs of the local public library as well as the 2,052-student system.

"We worked very diligently and strategically to advance our instructional program, while understanding the [financial] challenges our community residents face," Testa said.

MORE INSIDE NY per-pupil spending tops A15

Escape-prone kangaroo makes town, owners hop to it

CLARKS HILL, S.C. — South Carolina's most talented escape artist may be a kangaroo.

The McCormick County Sheriff's Office announced Thursday that a mischievous

marsupial was roaming the county for the second time in three days, news outlets reported.

Details about the kangaroo's Thursday morning exploits and capture were not

released.

Maj. Robert Christie said authorities have yet to discern how the kangaroo escaped, but it's likely the marsupial found a weak spot in the fence or a gate left open.

The kangaroo's Houdini act first was noticed Tuesday, when it was loose for a few hours. Calls came streaming in about a kangaroo sighting along Highway 28, Sheriff Clark Sterns said. Sterns said

its owner was notified and was able to corral the animal.

The unidentified owners are properly licensed to keep the kangaroo in South Carolina, the sheriff's office said.

— AP